

Marks of the Witch: Britain's ritual protection symbols

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MARKS OF THE WITCH

BRITAIN'S RITUAL PROTECTION SYMBOLS

'Witch mark' is a term popularly used to describe a range of ritual protection symbols found in churches, grand buildings and caves. **DAVID CLARKE** visits an ice age site where a huge concentration of magical graffiti was recently discovered.

My first visit to Creswell Crags, on the border between Derbyshire and

Nottinghamshire, was an excursion with my primary school during the 1970s. We scampered around the limestone gorge and entrances to dark caves that dotted the escarpment alongside a lake. Their names – Robin Hood's Cave, Pin Hole, Church Hole and Mother Grundy's Parlour, the latter reputedly the former home of a witch – were exotic and mysterious. In the Visitor's Centre were images of cavemen and long extinct animals such as the woolly mammoth that shared this harsh landscape with prehistoric hunter-gatherers during the last great Ice Age.

30 years later, a team of archaeologists discovered previously unknown Ice Age art on the walls of the caves. Before this find, prehistorians believed such magnificent art was confined to continental European examples such as the stunning paintings of extinct animals on the walls at Lascaux in the Dordogne region of southwest France. Britain's cave art has taken longer to give up its secrets. When it did, the treasures included ritual images not only from the Ice Age but spanning a vast period of prehistory and history. In 2004, Paul Bahn and Paul Pettit visited the Creswell caves early one April morning, urged on by one of the guides, just as the sunlight was streaming into the entrance of Church Hole. Through a combination of "luck and skill" they identified a panel of engravings depicting birds and at least 13 other animal figures in three of the caves.¹ Their discovery of the first cave art in Britain made international headlines, but one puzzle remained: how was it that images of stag, bison and birds hunted by our ancestors between 40-28,000 years ago had been completely missed by the Victorian excavators who had found extensive evidence of human occupation, including



LEFT: The marks were ignored for years because of their ubiquity.

OPPOSITE: Exploring the caves.

inside the caves overturned all previous ideas about the complex. Entrances to caves are always significant in folklore and required special protection. Dark and forbidding, they were hiding places for dangerous animals and outlaws – which explains the naming of Robin Hood's Cave or Hall, the largest cave on the crags and the longest to hold onto its secrets. In the mediæval period the presence of bats and inexplicable

draughts linked them with the abode of demons.³

A fresh discovery inside the caves overturned all previous ideas

some striking portable art carved in bone?

Creswell Crags have been visited by modern humans – and Neanderthals before them – since the Late Middle Palaeolithic – some 60-40,000 years ago. Groups of *Homo sapiens* left evidence of their tools and hunting expeditions in the caves from 29,000 years ago.² Much nearer our own time, during the Middle Ages, a small hamlet and a mill appeared at the west end of the gorge. It was villagers from here, along with early modern tourists, who left extensive evidence of their presence. On close examination, the caves are full of graffiti. Initials and dates of visitors are scratched, inscribed and cut into the walls, dating from many different centuries. Until recently, they were ignored because of their ubiquity.

The early mediæval villagers left no written records, but a fresh discovery

EXPLORING THE CAVES

Early in 2019, I was invited to return to Creswell Crags for a third time, in my role as a folklorist representing the new Centre for Contemporary Legend at Sheffield Hallam University. I was keen to examine what press accounts had called 'the entrance to Hell', a difficult-to-access area of the cave that is decorated with mysterious apotropaic marks (see FT378:4-5). The word apotropaic is from the Greek *apotropaïos*, meaning 'to turn away'. Wearing a hard hat with a caving lamp, a guide led me into one of the four main chambers deep inside Robin Hood's Cave. The cave lies on the south facing cliff near the centre of the gorge and extends into the limestone for about 50 metres. In the darkness our lamps flickered across the dank walls. As our eyes adjusted we could see initials and dates inscribed by earlier visitors. In the middle of one cluster, 1718 and 1720 were visible and then, deeper into the cave, another from 1505.

"We don't normally allow visitors into this part of the cave because it is so cramped," said guide Kat Middleton. "But if we crawl under the barrier beyond where the official tours end you will see something interesting."



CHARLOTTE GRAHAM PHOTOGRAPHY



ABOVE LEFT: The caves contain a wealth of inscribed symbols. ABOVE RIGHT: One of the 'Marian marks'. BELOW: A three-pronged mark "like a cricket stump".

That was an understatement. Once we had negotiated a metal fence we entered the deepest section of the cave where, to the right, a gaping chasm dropped away into the depths of the earth. Shining our torches just above the deep hole, we could make out a frieze of unusual carvings that framed the limestone wall. It was covered with ritual protection marks, or 'witch-marks' as they have become known.

Up close, the marks resolved into a series of overlapping Vs or Ws. These were made to call upon the protection of the Virgin Mary. Sitting alongside the so-called 'Marian marks' were 'PM', *Pace Maria*, along with numerous crosses and the letters 'IX' (see panel for a discussion of the four most common variants). These marks are distinct from the Ice Age art found elsewhere in the cave complex and date from the early modern period when the gorge was inhabited by superstitious Christians. In addition, Robin Hood's Cave also contains more unusual symbols, including a three-pronged mark "like a cricket stump" and the repeated letters R and T. Other symbols include diagonal lines, boxes and mazes that may be devices for capturing or trapping spirits. Some appear to have been added to over time, perhaps reflecting a need to strengthen protection in response to new threats.

As Owen Davies and Ceri Houlbrook point out, the term 'witch mark' used to describe such carvings has become widespread, although there is no direct evidence that they were concerned with averting witchcraft and "they may have had a more generic protective function".⁴ 'Witch mark' is also used to describe marks that were found on the bodies of those accused during the witch-hunts. Clearly the marks at Creswell Crags and elsewhere were not made by those accused of witchcraft. Folklorists

"The marks may have had a more generic protective function"



and historians refer to them collectively as 'ritual protection marks'. Little is known about their purpose and function but they were produced by people who wished to shield themselves from a range of malevolent supernatural powers.

MULTIPLE MARKS

The marks at Creswell were hiding in plain sight until a visit in the autumn of 2018 by two keen 'witch mark' hunters. The more they looked, the more they found. Soon it became obvious there were thousands of marks – "too numerous to count" – covering almost every part of the walls in two of the caves. Creswell now has the largest number so far identified in the British Isles, with a concentration directly over the chasm in Robin Hood's Cave. Access to the decorated caves has been enhanced by a collaboration with artist Jeremy Lee, a colleague from Sheffield Hallam University, who has used LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) scanning technology, more commonly used in surveying and to document crime scenes, to produce a 3D visualisation. The new technique allows visitors to explore the interior of the cave and examine the many scratches and carvings via a computer screen.⁵

The sheer number of ritual protection marks at Creswell has been described as "hugely important and the largest assemblage ever found in British caves" by Professor Ronald Hutton, one of the UK's leading authorities on folklore. Previously the record was held by a cave complex in the Mendip hills of Somerset where a group of 50 were recorded in 2007 in an area of Wookey Hole caves known as The Witch's Chimney. They lie close to The Witch of Wookey, a large stalagmite that was first mentioned in a written account dated 1628. In the same century, one local writer described how cattle that fed in the pastures through which the River Axe ran after its resurgence from the caves, had died suddenly after floods. He attributed this to the high concentration of lead in the area, but Linda Wilson notes that "it is easy to see how, in such deeply superstitious times, such



CHARLOTTE GRAHAM PHOTOGRAPHY

ABOVE: The Creswell Crags witch marks may represent the biggest collection of apotropaic marks in one place in the whole of the UK.

unexplained cattle deaths could well have been taken as evidence of the association of the cave with various forces of evil that were believed to play a large part in visiting trials and tribulations on the world.”⁶

Creswell guide John Charlesworth offers similar ideas as to why so many protective marks cluster in Robin Hood’s Cave. “There may have been a draft blowing through the cave at this point and evil spirits are supposed to follow flows of air, so it could be this that concerned them,” he said. Linda Wilson’s team identified a similar phenomenon during their expeditions into the caves at the Cheddar Gorge. At the Witch’s Chimney a cold convection draught can be detected by visitors, “quickly chilling anyone standing in there for any length of time”. In folklore, inexplicable blasts of this type were associated with paths used by spirits and fairies and required special magic to neutralise their uncanny presence.

John also believes the markings may have been necessary to protect the residents of the gorge from infant mortality and outbreaks of disease and pestilence: “They might want to do something practical and drive what they believed to be the source of the evil down into the furthest recesses of the darkest part of this cave in order to

trap it there.” While there are few surviving traditions of this type in the Midlands, the late Theo Brown, a folklorist from Devon, found examples in the folklore of southwest England. In her own study, Linda Wilson also quotes a 19th century poem that refers to the banishing of troublesome spirits into the cave of Wookey Hole:

*If then it return, you must pray and command,
By midnight, By moonlight,
By Death’s ebon wand,
That to Cheddar Cliffs now, it departeth in peace
And another seven years its sore troubling will cease.*

If, after seven years, the evil returned, more elaborate rituals were required to deal with it. Local cunning folk or a group of clergy gathered and the spirit was called out. It could be set a task that would occupy it for eternity, such as emptying a lake with a thimble. Alternatively, a final option might be cast it into the Red Sea, a place associated with the drowning of Pharaoh’s army and symbolic of the eternal battle between good and evil. In folklore, the Red Sea is a permanent prison for evil

spirits worthy of anything imagined by the writers of *Ghostbusters*. Perhaps a version of these beliefs provided the motivation for those who used ritual marks to neutralise whatever evil lurked beneath Creswell Crags.

NOTES

1 Paul Bahn and Paul Pettit, Britain’s Oldest Art: The ice-age cave art of Creswell Crags, English Heritage, 2009.

2 Creswell Crags Visitors Centre guidebook: www.creswell-craggs.org.uk

3 BBC4 Digging for Britain, series 8 (2020), interview with Creswell Crags guide John Charlesworth.

4 Owen Davies and Ceri Holubrook in Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft, Ashmolean Museum exhibition guide, 2018.

5 Jeremy Lee, Creswell Crags Witch Mark Cave tour: <https://vimeo.com/348358644>

6 CJ Binding and LJ Wilson, ‘Ritual Protection Marks in Wookey Hole and Long Hole, Somerset’, Proceedings of the University of Bristol Speleological Society 2010, 25 (1).

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PROTECTION FROM EVIL

The use of apotropaic marks – from incised symbols to ritual burn marks – to protect homes and buildings from supernatural attack is a near-universal and age-old practice



LEFT: A 'daisy wheel' at Bolsover Castle.
BELOW LEFT: Another example from a mediæval barn in the Peak District. BELOW RIGHT: Marian marks at Clandon Park.



Since the dawn of time people have used a wide range of magical rituals to neutralise a variety of supernatural powers. Anglo-Saxon charms protected against elves and demons, and following conversion to Christianity these beliefs survived in the oral tradition, under the gloss of the new religion. During the mediæval period, invocations to the Virgin, assorted saints and Christ displaced the old gods but the cloying presence of evil persisted. In the later Middle Ages, following the Reformation, the locus of evil was identified as the Devil and during the European witch-hunts, the idea of a Satanic pact with 'witches' received official recognition. During the reign of James VI of Scotland (later James I, 1603-25) fear and anxiety concerning witchcraft

grew to extraordinary levels. The King blamed the North Berwick witches for an attempt on his life in 1590 and, following the Gunpowder Plot or "Jesuit Treason" of November 1605, his government blamed the assassination attempt directly upon the "abominable practice of Rome and Satan".

In *Hidden Charms* James Wright links this fearful period with a desire to protect high-status buildings with a range of ritual marks. Protecting a home from evil is a very ancient practice and evidence for rituals, whether via a spell, hex or some other magical offering have been identified in buildings across the world (see, for example, FT332:11, 339:28-35). Liminal zones were seen as vulnerable to attack by evil spirits and

therefore hearths, windows and doors required special treatment. Chimneys and fireplaces were also focal points for clusters of protective marks as they were entry points for witches and, in later folklore, Santa Claus. A passage in the book *Demonologie* written by King James VI may refer to these ideas, noting that evil spirits "will come and pearce through whatsoever house or Church, though all ordinarie passages be closed, by whatsoever open, the aire may enter in at".

A recent survey of the Queen's House at the Tower of London by Wright identified 74 ritual protection marks in 31 locations.¹ The mediæval building acquired a fearsome reputation as the place where a number of high-profile political prisoners such as Sir Thomas More and Guy Fawkes were held or interrogated before their executions. Another survey of the King's Tower at Knole in Kent also revealed a large group of ritual protection marks in the first and second floor chambers of the stone building, which dates from the mid-15th century. Its owner, the Lord Treasurer and Earl of Dorset, Thomas Sackville, enjoyed the patronage of James I and remodelled the building in 1606 anticipating a royal visit. One of the wooden beams in the second-floor chamber is decorated with 11 protective marks including mesh patterns, 'Marian' marks and ritual burns. This beam has been dated by dendrochronology to the spring or summer of 1606, the height of the witchcraft mania. Even more intriguing, the protective marks on the beam were made with a carpenter's knife during the construction process, as they are horizontal to the timber, "indicating that the beam was standing upright in the framing yard" when they were added.

Ritual protective marks have only recently received the attention they deserve. One of the first papers on the subject appeared in 1999 when Tim Easton published his notes on marks identified inside East Anglian timber buildings dating from the period 1550-1750. In 2004, Linda Wilson and Chris Binding's discovery of marks in the Mendip caves helped to settle the debate

over their function. Before this evidence came to light some had suggested they had a purely practical function as carpenter's or mason's marks used to guide the placing of timbers in buildings. But the discoveries in Derbyshire and Somerset occur in clear ritual contexts that cannot possibly be linked with any construction function.

In 2016 Historic England asked the public to help them record new examples of protective markings across the UK. This appeal produced 600 responses, 100 of which came from parts of Scotland and Wales. The result demonstrates how widespread these marks actually are. The highest number (150) were reported from the Eastern Counties, where an earlier survey of 64,000 inscriptions in 800 parish churches had revealed that some 20 per cent have a ritual protection function. The survey results may be the tip of an iceberg or simply reflect the activities of fieldworkers like Brian Hoggard who runs www.apotropaios.com, but the secretive nature of counter-witchcraft helps to explain why they have been overlooked by generations of architectural historians and archaeologists.

Hoggard and other researchers have identified four main categories of ritual protection marks:

'DAISY WHEELS', HEXAFOILS OR TRISKELES

The wheel is an ancient Solar symbol that has been identified from Egyptian tombs and prehistoric ritual sites in Europe. These geometric symbols were cut with a pair of compasses and sometimes contain three petals indicating the Trinity. Others have six or 12 petals but all are thought to be protective, acting as 'demon traps' to capture, confuse or deflect evil spirits. Examples have been found on the roof timbers of barns and walls of churches dating from the medieval period until as recently as the 19th century. Some appear to have been cut in fresh wood before it was incorporated into buildings while others were made once the timber had dried out. Examples include those at Shakespeare's birthplace, where they are carved near the door to a cellar once used to store beer. Striking examples can be found on the walls of the tithe barn at Bradford-upon-Avon and in the 17th century Star Chamber at Bolsover Castle in Derbyshire.

PENTAGRAMS

Five-pointed stars are known in ancient Greece and are mentioned in both Jewish texts and the Babylonian Talmud. The 'Star of David' or the 'Seal of Solomon', formed by two triangles, occurs throughout the early modern period in Europe as a potent symbol to deflect demons. In the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the hero has a pentagram painted



on his shield to protect him against evil during his quest. In more recent years the pentagram has become associated with black magic, paganism and witchcraft, but its original function was protective, as can be seen from numerous examples in religious and secular buildings such as Little Moreton Hall in Cheshire.

MARIAN MARKS

The double VV symbol, sometimes intertwined in the middle to form an inverted M or upright W, is ubiquitous in buildings dating from the 15th to the 18th centuries. Since 2004 many examples have been identified in the caves of the Mendips and, more recently, at Creswell Crags. A popular Marian prayer, attributed to Father Claude Bernard (1588-1641) includes the line "I fly to thee, Mary, Virgin of virgins, mother of Jesus Christ" and the use of this Christian protective symbol survived religious changes during the Reformation. It continued in use as late as the 19th century, when it appears to have become a generic good luck symbol. Other variants include the letters AM and PM for *Pace Maria* and IH – the first two letters of the Greek form of Jesus. These can be found in large numbers scratched upon wooden beams in barns or etched into the plasterwork of mediæval churches and houses.

ABOVE: Protective daisy wheels in Shakespeare's birthplace. **LEFT:** Ritual 'burn marks' in the Tudor kitchens at Haddon Hall in Derbyshire.

'MESH MARKS'

These are patterns that functioned as 'demon traps', with an endless line that was intended to ensnare evil spirits like a spider catching a fly. Once inside the mesh, the malevolent forces would be pinned against the wall and unable to escape the endless line inside the maze.

BURN MARKS

These were made by a candle or taper held against timber for lengthy periods of time to create a tear-shaped mark. This was a form of magic whereby exposing timber to a deliberate flame could prevent a more disastrous blaze of the type that regularly destroyed mediæval buildings. Experimental archaeology has confirmed these markings could not have been created accidentally. Burn or scorch marks were evil-averting and large numbers have been found in the kitchens of Haddon Hall in Derbyshire and the King's Tower at Knole in Kent, both dating from the 17th century.

The scorch marks on the door of Blythburgh church in Suffolk are said, in folklore, to be the finger-marks of the Devil, who appeared in the form of a huge black dog during a service on Sunday morning in August 1577 (see **FT 66:53; 195:30-35; 340:18-19**). Ironically, they may have been placed there to protect the church against evil. As is often the case in folklore, a story emerged to explain their presence long after their original purpose had been forgotten.

NOTES

- 1 Brian Hoggard, *Magical House Protection: the Archaeology of Counter-witchcraft*, 2019.
- 2 James Wright, 'Cultural anxieties and ritual protection in high-status early modern houses', *Hidden Charms* conference proceedings 2016.

WITCH MARKS IN NATIONAL TRUST PLACES

As you might expect from an organisation that looks after so many old buildings, the National Trust has a fine collection of witch marks, and many of them are on public view



NATIONAL TRUST IMAGES / JAMES DOBSON



MATTHEW CHAMPION



LEFT: RACHEL HALL, CENTRE: NATIONAL TRUST IMAGES / JOHN HAMMOND



1 The timber-framed Tudor-period Little Moreton Hall in Cheshire has more than 250 apotropaic symbols including burn-marks, circles and criss-crossed lines, but you might need a guide with a torch to point them out to you. One of the most elaborate is a 12-petal daisy wheel high up on a ceiling beam in the Great Parlour. Lavenham Guildhall in Suffolk is of a similar age and also has a daisy-wheel, plus a mummified cat found in the walls.

2 Stone-built Bodiam Castle in Kent has protective symbols around many of the doors and windows. These were probably added when the castle was constructed. They can be difficult to spot because the exterior markings are now quite weathered and to the untrained eye they're easily confused with the mason's marks.

3 A rare type of witch-mark can easily be seen on the outer wall of the stable block at Belton

House in Lincolnshire. The star-shaped ausklis cross is more common in Eastern Europe where it's regarded as a holy sign for driving away evil spirits. No one is quite certain how these ended up on a late 17th century building near Grantham. Stables obviously needed protection as well as houses because there's a daisy wheel near a west-facing window on the stable block – now gift shop – at Canons Ashby in Northamptonshire.

4 The witch marks at Woolsthorpe Manor are intriguing because it's just possible they were made by mathematician and alchemist Sir Isaac Newton. Newton was known for scribbling on the walls of his rooms, and the graffiti at Woolsthorpe – including a rough sketch of a post-mill – is frequently attributed to him.

5 At Thorington Hall in Essex you can sleep safely in a



building protected by witch marks on the newel post of the main stairs. The building is rented out as a holiday cottage – though it's usually open for general viewing on Heritage Open Days. It is reputedly haunted by the spirit of a little girl in brown, so either the witch marks aren't working or the spirit is a friendly one.

6 In 2015, archaeologists surveying Knole in Kent uncovered criss-crossed lines beneath the floor of a room built to accommodate King James I – a well-known opponent of witchcraft. Unfortunately, the effort was wasted as King James never actually visited Knole.

7 At Clandon Park in Surrey, witch marks in the form of crossed lines, V and M symbols, and a five-pointed star scratched into beams and plaster and hidden behind panelling, were only discovered after the building was gutted by fire in 2015. The

building dates from the 1730s so it's interesting that these protective symbols were still in use well into the Enlightenment.

8 A very rare set of witch marks can be seen on the hearth stones of the Fleece Inn in Worcestershire. These wide circles, which appear to have been worn rather than chiselled into the stone, are painted and have been maintained by a succession of landlords. The 15th century building which started out as a farmhouse was owned by one family until it was given to the National Trust by the last of the line, Lola Taplin, in 1977. Lola was very proud of her witch marks and was photographed rubbing them with an abrasive chalky "donkey stone". If this was the traditional way the family kept them fresh, that might account for the wear. It's interesting to note that if witch marks could be chalked or painted, they may once have been even more common than they are now.

Other places to see witch marks include Tattershall castle in Lincolnshire, which has a range of mediaeval graffiti, including a protective circular 'compass mark' near one of the windows. Perhaps it was felt that this unusual brick-built castle might need extra protection from the supernatural.

In some buildings the witch marks are in concealed spaces known only to the person who made them – and presumably to the evil spirits repelled by them. A collection of witch marks tucked away in the attics of The Vyne near Basingstoke can only be seen on rare behind-the-scenes house tours.

Details to help you plan your visit to all the properties mentioned are available from the National Trust website: www.nationaltrust.org.uk. Due to the spread of coronavirus, all National Trust houses, parks and gardens are currently closed. Check the website for details on future re-opening.